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SUBJECT: POLAND/BELARUS - IS DIALOGUE WORKING?

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: At an April 2 conference on EU-Belarus relations, panel participants representing the GOP, parliament, and think-tanks agreed that the EU's earlier policy of isolation failed, but disagreed on the extent to which the EU and Poland should "conditionalize" dialogue with Belarus. MP Robert Tyszkiewicz (Civic Platform, PO) and Pawel Kazanecki of the East-European Democratic Center criticized the GOP's focus on the Polish minority in Belarus, and stressed the need to engage the opposition. Panelists agreed the changes implemented by Lukashenka following the suspension of the EU sanctions are mainly cosmetic, and could be easily reversed. Tyszkiewicz emphasized the EU Eastern Partnership's potential to drive dialogue with Belarus. Kazanecki called for a detailed EU "road map," laying out conditions Belarus would have to meet in order to receive specific concessions from the EU. END SUMMARY.

MFA: DIALOGUE IS THE ONLY OPTION

¶2. (U) Speaking at an April 2 debate organized by the Warsaw-based Stefan Batory Foundation, Deputy FM Andrzej Kremer stated that the GOP determined in early 2008 that the EU's policy of isolating Belarusian leaders had not been successful. Since then, the Polish MFA has instituted a system of regular dialogue at the deputy minister and department director levels. This engagement was supplemented by two high-level economic visits -- a Belarusian delegation's participation in the Krynica Economic Forum in late 2008 and Deputy PM Pawlak's February 2009 visit to Minsk. (NB: Kremer neglected to mention FM Sikorski's October 2008 bilat with Belarusian FM Martynov.) Kremer said the GOP had placed renewed emphasis on the GOB's treatment of the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB) as a criterion for sustained dialogue. Robert Tyszkiewicz, a Civic Platform (PO) MP and Deputy Chair of the Sejm Foreign Affairs Committee, positively assessed the GOP's dialogue-oriented approach, which had created an opening to present demands to the regime. He and Pawel Kazanecki of the East-European Democratic Center, an NGO that works with Belarusian opposition leaders, urged the GOP to "think beyond" the Polish minority by similarly pressing the GOB to include the Belarusian opposition in dialogue.

COSMETIC CHANGES

¶3. (U) Tyszkiewicz and Kazanecki, who based their assessment of recent developments in Belarus chiefly on contacts with the Belarusian opposition and civil society organizations, agreed that there had not been much real progress toward democratization since October 2008. Tyszkiewicz argued that changes in the legal system were primarily "decorative," asserting that the most significant change was in the repressive methods used by the regime, i.e., a shift from political and judicial tactics to economic pressure. Kazanecki agreed and stressed the conclusions of a report prepared by Belarusian civil society organizations on developments since October 2008, which stated that "while a small number of organizations have benefited and individual initiatives have taken place, little has been done to facilitate the functioning of independent civic and media sectors in any meaningful manner."

Kremer acknowledged that "some progress" did not equate to fulfillment of the EU's expectations -- while dialogue in itself is a positive development, the GOP and EU must try to measure concrete progress.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP VS. ROAD MAP APPROACH

¶4. (U) Tyszkiewicz argued that the EU's Eastern Partnership is "the only feasible tool" for putting pressure on Minsk to implement economic and political reforms. He reiterated the need to include Belarusian civil society in Eastern Partnership programs, stating that the EU should closely monitor progress on democratization and make its assistance for Belarus dependent on it. Tyszkiewicz added that existing projects like satellite and radio programming should be continued. Kazanecki expressed skepticism about the Eastern Partnership's potential to bring about real change in Belarus, especially given the scope of the country's economic crisis and its resulting increased financial dependence on Moscow. He stressed that Russia had many instruments to block EU-Belarusian dialogue, including the close linkages between Belarusian and Russian security systems. In this broad context, Kazanecki called for a long-term "road map" or "action plan" in which the EU would outline specific demands -- with timelines and indicators for assessing compliance -- instead of the broad conditions in the EU's current CFSP Conclusions. In exchange, Kazanecki said, the EU should offer Belarus a broader package than the Eastern Partnership in order to be more competitive with Moscow.

WHAT ABOUT ECONOMIC REFORMS?

¶5. (U) In follow-on Q&A, some audience members complained that the
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panel had not addressed economic cooperation with Belarus, suggesting that positive developments in the Belarusian economy could trigger political change. The chair of the Polish-Belarusian Commercial Chamber, Jozef Lochowski, pointed to the "high volume" (USD 3 billion) of bilateral trade. He argued that Belarus is a reliable and sound trading partner for a number of small Polish businesses in the border region. Deputy FM Kremer acknowledged while there has been some progress on negotiating a "small border traffic" agreement with Belarus, it is too early to say there had been a "breakthrough." Tyszkiewicz noted the numerous obstacles that Polish businesses encounter while attempting to do business in Belarus. Tyszkiewicz and Kazanecki argued that economic change alone is not enough; indeed, Belarus will need to implement political reforms in order to attract large-scale investment. Kazanecki also stressed that the EU is not just an economic community, but one based on shared values.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) Polish policymakers and opinion leaders remain keenly interested in promoting democracy in Belarus. While largely convinced that the EU's former policy of isolation did not work, the public debate revealed a wide range of opinions on the extent to which Poland and the EU should "conditionalize" assistance to Belarus via the Eastern Partnership (EP) and other EU programs. This may be an indication of strong support for making participation in EP projects contingent on fulfilling specific criteria, or even making the extent of Belarusian participation contingent on fulfilling a range of criteria. Most striking was the frank criticism of the GOP's narrow focus on Lukashenka's treatment of the Polish minority -- rather than a larger cross-section of the opposition -- as a litmus test for sustained engagement.

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